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**Kindergarteners' Acceptance of the Social Behavior
of a Child with Special Needs**

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Abstract

Positive relationships between children are a concern in inclusionary classrooms. This naturalistic study examines the relationship between children's perceptions of their peer's capabilities and its significance in making friendship choices. It was found that young children utilize verbal and non-verbal language skills as the basis of decisions about friendship.

Friendships between children with and without identified special needs have been an increasing concern of parents and teachers as more children with special needs are included in regular educational classroom settings. One of the goals of inclusion, especially among younger children, is to foster positive social interaction among children with and without special needs. Peck, Odom, and Bricker (1993) describe social interaction in the preschool classroom as "the direct exchange of words, gestures, toys, or materials between two or more children." They viewed social interaction as a:

chain of social behaviors in which social partners contribute different behaviors or links in a chain. The first behavior in a social interaction chain is often called a social initiation, and subsequent behaviors in the chain are called social responses. These behaviors are bi-directional or reciprocal in nature, in that different partners in social interactions direct social behaviors to the other partner, who in turn directs social behaviors back to the original child (p. 41).

Rewarding friendships and successful social interaction have been documented as especially important to children with special needs. Negative experiences in social interaction with peers in early childhood are related to later emotional and mental health problems (Kemple, 1991). Children with disabilities who are placed in regular preschools and experience social rejection by peers without disabilities, tend to "display more social isolation, place more demands on teacher time, are less attentive, and are more often the recipients of negative behaviors from normally developing children" (Hundert & Houghton, 1992, p. 311).

Despite the occasional warmhearted stories of a typically developing child asking a peer in a wheelchair or a friend with Down Syndrome to a birthday party, teachers and parents often hear reports of isolation, exclusion and rejection. These early experiences of rejection can lead to low self-esteem and loneliness (Bullock, 1992). These negative interactions may contribute to "less favorable perceptions of school, higher levels of school avoidance, and lower levels of school performance" (Kemple, 1991, p. 48). These can also have adverse effects on higher mental functions. When children have limited opportunity to or facility in watching, imitating, and interacting positively with others, the development of higher social, cultural, and psychological skills may be affected. Limited social experiences also may hinder language development, which, in turn, leads to a diminished level of linguistic interaction since children have less to talk about. This lower level of language development completes the critical circle by restricting and therefore affecting social interaction.

In spite of the emphasis on the benefits of inclusion for both students with and without disabilities, formal and informal research continues to report that children with disabilities placed in regular preschools often experience social rejection by peers without disabilities.

Diamond (1994) reported that children without disabilities are likely to view peers with disabilities as less competent in the cognitive, language and physical domains than their peers without disabilities. Children with disabilities are less likely to be chosen as "well-liked" playmates (Devoney, Guralnick & Rubin, 1974; Diamond, LeFurgy & Blass, 1993; Guralnick & Groom, 1987). Children with disabilities are more likely to be described as "isolated" and more often participate in solitary as opposed to cooperative play (Guralnick, 1990; Odom & McEvoy, 1988; Snyder, Appolloni & Cooke, 1977). Young children with special needs, it is noted, engage in less frequent and less sophisticated social play than do their typically developing peers (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992).

It is important to note, however, that much of the information available on peer interaction between children with and without special needs is based on *informal measures* of feelings and attitudes of the typically developing children. For example, a child might be asked whether or not she would be willing to include a little boy who uses a wheelchair in a game of Candyland. A little boy might be asked if he would include another little boy with visual handicaps in the kitchen center. Consequently, the answers of the children (self-reporting measures) would be used to assume the children's attitudes regarding their peers with special needs. Self-reporting is generally thought of as a weak measure of behavior and attitudes. Thus, the conclusions reached are based on "hypothetical interaction" between the children with and without special needs. Research results based on formal assessment, measuring children's actual interaction would be more reliable. Diamond (1994) suggests that the results of informal assessment of a peer's competence are limited because the respondent may not have been presented with the opportunity to interact with a child with a disability. In addition, a child without a disability may not be inclined to choose the peer with a disability as a friend and therefore the typically developing child has little experience on which to base his or her opinion.

Research Question

Diamond (1994) suggests that the relationship between children's perceptions of the capabilities of their peers and significance of such information in making friendship choices should be studied closely. It has been suggested that the difficulties experienced by children with special needs in participating in positive social interaction and in establishing friendships may be the result of the tendency for these children to be slower in acquiring the skills and knowledge to interact successfully with other children. Direct intervention may be beneficial for children to increase the likelihood of successful integration into the regular classroom. It would be necessary to delineate the specific skills needed in order to begin appropriate support. Therefore, the following research question was proposed: **On what basis do young children in a classroom setting make the determination of desirability of friendship with their peers?**

Case History

A six year old girl, Mindy (a pseudonym) was enrolled in a kindergarten class in February of her kindergarten year. The family had just moved into the neighborhood, and, although her daughter had not attended kindergarten previously, mother wanted Mindy to start school then. It was reported that there were no transfer records from previous pre-school programs and medical records were generic in nature, so no information was gained through that channel. It was evident from the child's physical appearance that she had Down Syndrome, yet it would have been unwise and insensitive to assume that

the mother was aware of this fact. It would have also been illegal to presume that just because the child appeared to have Down Syndrome, that she needed any special placement or services other than the regular kindergarten classroom placement, perhaps with some special services.

Mindy was assigned to an afternoon kindergarten class with an exceptionally effective and understanding teacher. The teacher, Ms. A. was informed of the dilemma in which the school had been placed and was advised to do the best that she could do with Mindy until the proper steps were initiated. The principal assured the teacher she would be given support, if needed.

Classroom Environment

There were 23 kindergartners enrolled in Ms. A's class, 11 boys and 13 girls ranging in age from 5 yrs., 7 months to 7 yrs., 3 months. Ms. A. presented herself as a creative and understanding teacher, who respected each child as an individual and who was supportive of the developmentally appropriate curriculum in the classroom. Children sat at six large tables, identified by color; interest centers were located around the room and continually updated with objects and stimulating activities that would spark the children's curiosity. Children's artwork hung from the ceiling and covered the walls in the hall; and music was often played as the children worked. Books and stories on tape were available at a variety of reading levels from board books to chapter books. Ms. A. incorporated the approaches of whole language and language experience, using units or themes to "teach across the curriculum", in her kindergarten classroom. Children were free to interact with any of the other children at their assigned table while seated as long as it was in an appropriate manner. Formal instruction was short, interesting and active, and children were allowed to move around the room in a manner that showed respect for the activities and needs of other children. While working in centers, the children were encouraged to interact with the other children in the center. Children seemed busy and happy with their kindergarten experience.

Previous Experience

Since this was most of the children's first year of formal education, it was not possible to ascertain the degree to which the kindergartners had interacted with children with special needs in the past. Ms. A. was certified in early childhood education and had received no formal training in special education. She stated that, as most experienced teachers, she had previously taught children with mild special needs.

Description of Interaction

Mindy was welcomed as a new student in the classroom. A "buddy" was assigned to show Mindy where and how to store her personal belongings and the location of classroom supplies. Mindy's buddy also showed her where the bathroom, office and cafeteria were located, how to return a book to the library, what to do in the computer and science labs, etc. Mindy was transported to school on a bus with several of the other children in her room.

Although Ms. A. allowed for an abundance of physical movement during class time, remaining seated in a chair during table work and sitting on the floor during group time was a difficult task for Mindy. Ms. A. gently reminded all of the children to sit on their bottoms and verbally praised responsive and appropriate behavior. Recognizing that the attention span of most six year olds is limited, group activities were kept short and included opportunities for verbal and physical responses. Mindy appeared

to have difficulty focusing on the teacher during group time and was therefore unprepared to respond as the other children did. Mindy displayed other inappropriate behaviors such as taking off her clothes, throwing herself on the floor, running around the room, and knocking supplies off the tables. Mrs. A instituted several interventions to help Mindy adjust to her new classroom and to help her become familiar with new expectations, but these seemed only mildly effective. The intervention assistance team was convened and a diagnostic evaluation was recommended for Mindy.

Intervention and Support

It was decided that an aide be provided for Mindy in the classroom during the period of time that Mindy was participating in a multi-factored evaluation. In addition, the aide accompanied Mindy on the bus ride to and from school, in the classroom and to music and physical education. It is important to note that the teacher did not explain to the children why there was an extra person to help on the bus and in the classroom. Extra adults were commonplace in Ms. A.'s room, as she had instituted an active volunteer program.

When the children questioned Mindy's behavior, the teacher explained that Mindy was getting used to new rules in a new classroom. Ms. A. was very respectful of the individual needs of all children and continued to hold the same expectations and interact with Mindy as she did with all the other children in her class.

After the multi-factored evaluation was completed, it was decided that Mindy's needs would best be served by placement in a self-contained classroom in another local school. This placement was effective immediately. She had been in the kindergarten classroom a total of 5 weeks. Three days after Mindy left, Ms. A. had not, as yet, given the class any explanation of the whereabouts of Mindy, but planned to do so at the start of the following week.

Method

As a volunteer, this author had been working individually with the children in the hallway on a literacy project on a bi-weekly basis. Therefore, rapport had been established between this author and the children. As each of the 21 children present that day completed the project, specific questions were asked in a conversational manner. The author attempted to retain an informal atmosphere in questioning about Mindy, as would be commonplace if the child were relating information about other students who might be absent that day and therefore not coming into the hall to complete their literacy project.

The responses that the students offered were recorded as the children answered the questions. Recording their responses did not appear to disturb them, because the literacy project in which they had just participated required the recording of their answers as well.

The questions asked of the children and their responses follow. Where appropriate, the children's responses are used to support previous research on the topic of social interaction between children who are typically developing and those who are atypically developing.

Results

Fifteen questions were asked of the children as they colored or drew or completed the project that was provided in their individual packets during a literacy project.

1. **Where is Mindy?** Six students replied that they didn't know; two stated that she was sick; and 13 said that she had gone to a different school.

2. Of the students who answered that Mindy had changed schools, the question was asked "**Why did she go to a different school?**" Two students answered that she had moved again, and the other 11 stated one of the following:

"They had her in the wrong school";

"She couldn't behave on the bus and she had to go to a school where they had seat belts on the bus";

"She kept running around the room" and

"She did stuff she wasn't suppose [sic] to".

One boy explained that she had to "go to a school where the teachers could train her to act better." This boy's mother was a volunteer in the kindergarten classroom and his response might indicate that he and his mother might have discussed Mindy's move.

3. With the 13 students who said she had changed schools, the author acted surprised and commented something similar to "**Gee, I didn't know that. Do you miss her?**" A couple of students just looked inquisitively at the author, making no response. One student responded "kinda", and 10 indicated that they did not.

4. To the 10 students who indicated that they did not miss Mindy, the question "**Why?**" was directed. Two children shrugged their shoulders, and the other 8 responded with the following or similar statements:

"She didn't know how to behave";

"She just ran around the classroom and took off her clothes";

"She wouldn't listen to Ms. A.";

"She wouldn't sit down";

"She wouldn't be quiet"; or

"When she wanted something, she would just yell, she wouldn't tell anybody what she wanted".

To summarize, behavioral reasons were given as to why students didn't miss her.

5. When asked **"Did Mindy have fun in your classroom?"**, most children responded "Yes"; one continued that she had "messed the room all up". Four children said that they didn't know or weren't sure, because she didn't talk with or play with the other children.

6. The children were asked **"What did Mindy learn in your room?"** Several children indicated that they didn't know. One child answered "To play in the kitchen area"; another child said "to run around the room". A couple of students said that she had learned "nothing", and the rest offered no answer.

7. When questioned **"At what did Mindy do the best?"**, two children said that Mindy was good at playing in the kitchen; one of them adding that "she left a mess in the kitchen" which one of them had to clean up because Mindy wouldn't. This child was asked **"Did you play with Mindy in the kitchen?"** "She wouldn't let anybody play with her, she just grabbed every toy I picked up", she explained. One child noted that Mindy was "good at putting the markers away".

8. **"What was hard for Mindy?"** elicited answers such as:

"Listening";

"Everything";

"Sitting still in the classroom and on the bus";

"Sitting on the carpet";

"Drawing the pictures that we did"; and

"Keeping her clothes on".

When asked **"Why do you think those things were hard for Mindy?"**, one child responded "She was little and didn't know any better". Another child proposed that "Mindy was new in school and no one told her she was suppose [sic] to". One child suggested that "If Mindy needed something, she should ask us. I'd get it for her, if I was tall enough".

Responses to questions #4 and # 8 support the findings of Peterson (1991) who found that children expected other children to ask for something if they needed it.

9. **"How do you think that we could have helped Mindy listen to Ms. A or sit still in class and on the bus?"** The suggestion was made by a couple of the children that Mindy could earn candy (or stars) by sitting during the whole story which Ms. A read. Another child stated that "If Mindy watched us listening to Ms. A., then she would know that she was suppose to listen and maybe she would." One boy shrugged his shoulders with his hands out and said "Beats me, everyone tried". Another little fellow, who had recently spent time with the principal, offered to take Mindy to the principal and added "It makes me be good". A little girl had an idea on how to help Mindy keep her clothes on; she suggested that Mindy's mom buy her overalls with "snaps on them that are too hard to open". "That would do it", she added.

The suggestions made by Mindy's peers supports the findings of Diamond (1994) which indicates that young children suggest the same type of problem-solving strategies to help children with disabilities as they would to help children without identifiable disabilities.

10. The question was asked **"How old was Mindy?"**. Student responses indicated that they thought that Mindy was either 4 or 5 years old. All the kindergarten respondents were, by this time of the year, either 6 or 7 years old. All the students judged Mindy to be younger than they, although based on her stature, it would have been logical for the kindergartners to judge her to be older than they.

When asked **"Why do you think that?"**, all the children indicated one of the following behaviors as being responsible for their judgment that Mindy was only 4 or 5 years old:

"She ran around the room";

"She took off her clothes",

"She didn't listen to the teacher",

"She didn't sit down in group time";

"She talked baby-talk": or

"She couldn't talk -- just made noises".

These were all behavioral reasons for assuming Mindy was younger than they, not academic reasons. No one said of Mindy, "She didn't know her letters", or "She couldn't color neatly". This suggests that the children were not judging Mindy's academic abilities, and thus that the classroom was likely developmentally appropriate in nature and that the emphasis and measure of success were not on academics.

Referring to the answers to questions 9 and 10, Mindy's peers gave the fact that Mindy was "little and didn't know any better" as the reason that Mindy displayed inappropriate behaviors. This supports the findings of Diamond (1993) who noted that young children often refer to immaturity when explaining the inappropriate behavior of their peers with disabilities. Young children are very aware of immature language and other behaviors associated with language delay (Diamond, 1993)

11. Of all of the children the question was asked **"Who was the woman who helped Mindy out sometimes?"** Many of the children indicated that they didn't know, but six of them said that the woman (the aide) was Mindy's mother (one child added that she came to school to make Mindy behave) and one of the children said that the woman was another teacher.

12. The question was asked **"Who were Mindy's best friends?"** Some children shrugged their shoulders; seven said she didn't have any, and five responded that Lisa was Mindy's best friend (Lisa and Mindy rode the same bus, but did not live near each other).

13. To the question **"Why didn't she have any best friends"**, the seven children said of Mindy that :

"She was just little and didn't know any better";

"She didn't say hi or talk to us"; or that

"She didn't play with anyone".

One child said "She sat next to me, but she didn't look at me", the child who sat next to Mindy at table responded "She wouldn't share".

When asked "**What did Lisa do to be Mindy's best friend?**", the five children said that Lisa was kind to Mindy and had helped Mindy find the right room when she got off the bus. Three children noted that Lisa "had let her" sit next to her at story time.

Lisa was asked "**Why do you think that the other children thought that you were Mindy's best friend?**". Lisa answered that "Someone needed to help Mindy out, because she was a new kid". The author responded that it was very kind of her to invite Mindy to sit by her. Lisa responded that she told Mindy she could sit by her, but that "she never stayed put, anyhow". Lisa also mentioned that Mindy didn't know how to play in housekeeping, she just took the dolls and ran around the room. She added "Even when I didn't chase her, she kept running...she didn't even care".

14. **How could you have been a good friend to Mindy?** was the next question asked. Several children indicated that they didn't know; two said that they did not want to be a friend to Mindy; five indicated that when she acted like she was supposed to, they would be her friend. One child advised that when Mindy learned to talk, then she would have lots of friends. Two children observed that when Mindy grew up or got older, they could be friends. One little girl said that if it was her classroom job to be Mindy's buddy, that she would help Mindy and would let Mindy sit by her.

15. **"If Mindy came back to your room, what would you do?"** was the final question asked of the kindergartners. "Nothing" was a statement made by several children; three said "Try to help her be good". **"How?"** "By showing her how a kindergartner should act". Another child said "I'd tell her to sit by me at my table".

Discussion

The research question examined was: **On what basis do young children in a classroom setting make the determination of desirability of friendship with their peers?**

Based on the answers to the informal questions asked of Mindy's kindergarten peers, the following conclusions may be made:

- These kindergartners judged Mindy's desirability as a friend based on her behavior rather than by her common placement, interests, physical size or appearance.
- Behavior was more important to these kindergartners than was academic performance in judging Mindy's acceptability and age.

- The children judged Mindy's age on the basis of her behavior even more than on her physical size or the fact that she was in kindergarten with them.

In the area of behavior, social interaction appeared to be more influential in determining desirability as a friend than did general classroom behavior:

- These children expected Mindy to look at them when interacting with her.
- They expected Mindy to physically interact with them when playing.
- They expected Mindy to answer questions when asked and ask them questions in return.
- They expected Mindy to ask permission to play with toys with which they were playing.

Implications of findings

What conclusions can be drawn from the responses of these kindergartners? It is evident that verbal and non-verbal language skills are the basis of decisions about friendship made by children. If one goal of inclusion is friendship, then what behaviors need to be developed and encouraged in young children with special needs to facilitate acceptance in the early childhood classroom? From Mindy's classmates, we have seen that social behaviors are most important in determining friendships, judgments of age, appropriateness, and acceptability. On the basis of on Mindy's peers, and supported by other research, it is evident that several skills must be developed prior to inclusion and continually reinforced once inclusion has taken place: These communicative skills could be reinforced among children in the inclusionary classroom as well, for the benefit of all children

Eye contact

Research results by Raver-Lampman (1985), which supported eye-gaze training in children with visual handicaps, indicated that people judge others as more friendly and capable, when eye contact is made with them. Therefore, young children need to be encouraged to fix their gaze on the speaker and to look at others to whom they are speaking. Likewise, children without disabilities might be encouraged to tell a child to look at them when they are speaking.

Verbal greeting and conversational skills

Diamond (1994) found that children with disabilities were viewed as less competent than were children without disabilities in the areas of language. This supports the findings of this qualitative research, which shows that language as related to social skills and interactional skills was used to judge the subject's rating as a friend or as a peer desirable with whom to play.

Batache (1993), in reviewing research of social skills, consistently documented interactional language skills including verbal greetings ("Hi!"), social initiations ("Can I play?") inviting skills ("Want to play with me") and general conversational skills as critical to a child's social success. Mindy's peers pointed out that she didn't talk with them or respond to their queries or communicate with them, even when they happened to be involved in a group play situation (such as in the kitchen center). Therefore, young

children need to be encouraged to use social language in greeting others and to make their needs and wants known by using language.

Play and Sharing Skills

Mindy was observed to spend less time in interactional play than did her peers, which supports Guralnick's (1990) conclusion that children with special needs often engage in solitary play. Batsche (1993) indicates that play skills, including the ability to play near or with another child, are crucial to a child's social success. Adequate role-taking skills such that a child is able to identify with the feelings or perceptions of a peer, are also recommended by Batsche as a pre-requisite skill for successful inclusion. Young children should be encouraged to discuss their own feelings and to conjecture what others may be feeling based on their own feelings in similar situations.

Summary:

Practical application of this naturalistic study would indicate that the pre-school youngster with special needs should experience many opportunities to learn, observe and practice interactional skills, both verbal and physical. A fully-inclusionary, language-rich classroom with caregivers/teachers who are committed to providing a language-centered classroom with a developmentally-appropriate, individually-appropriate curriculum would be the ideal environment for young children with, and for that matter, even without, identified special needs. Parental and caregiver expectations for appropriate social interactions should be maintained at as high a level as possible to help all young children develop those skills that will help insure friendship and acceptance in the kindergarten classroom.

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